No. 26. Physick 26 #15

Erysipelas
St. Anthonys fire.

Wm. Rankin

admitted March 12th 1816

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The effects of Unguent: Hydrarg: fort: in erysipelas —

The erysipelas, rose, or St. Anthony's fire, is a disease which was well known to the ancients. Even in the days of Hyppocrates and Galen, it claimed a share of medical attention. But there is no writer, who has given it a better discription than Cullen. he enumerates all its symptoms with his usual precision and correctness. Besides this distinguished author, many others of later date have given it a place in their writings.

Although this disease has engaged, so much, the attention of the medical world, its treatment has not yet become very certain. Notwithstanding, its constitutional remedies, already in common use, are sufficiently successful; topical applications, to relieve the violent burning pain on the surface of the skin are very deficient. My principal object, then, in this dissertation, shall be to propose some local remedy, which may be more successful in this indication, than those heretofore adopted. And if I fail in this design, my attempt may not be altogether useless; for it may have the effect of stimulating others to efforts more availing.

Before detailing the treatment of this disease, it will be necessary to give a general outline of its causes and symptoms.

Cullen defines erysipelas to be "an inflammatory affection of the skin, with hardly any evident swelling; of a mixed, and not very bright red colour, readily disappearing

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upon pressure, but quickly returning again: the redness of no regular circumscription; but spreading unequally and continuing almost constantly to spread upon the neighbouring parts, with a pain like to that from burning; producing blisters sometimes of a small, and sometimes of a larger size; and always ending in a desquamation of the scarf-skin, sometimes in gangrene."

The persons most predisposed to this disorder are the young and irritable, and those of a sanguine and choleric temperament.

The causes of erysipelas appear to be various, and to enumerate them all would be entirely nugatory; as they are laid down in a particular manner by a number excellent authors; we will therefore only mention a few of the most prominent; as wounds, fractures, bruises, cold damp air, heat too long continued, poisons of various kinds, passions of the mind, irritating contents of the alimentary canal, obstructed perspiration &c.

The efficacy of these causes in the production of the disease, depends very much upon the state of the constitution; to which also is, in part, to be ascribed the various grades or types of the complaint. Thus persons, that are addicted to any species of intemperance whether of eating or drinking, are more

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liable, upon the reception of local injuries, to attacks of erysipelas, than such as are regular and restricted in their mode of living. In the latter instance, there would, probably, be nothing more than unhealthy phlegmonous inflammation.

This disease has been ascribed by Hippocrates and Galen, to congestions of bile; but this doctrine, founded upon the old humoral pathology, has long since been rejected, except by Tissot and some other more modern writers, who still continue to advocate the principles of that antiquated system.

The preceeding agents act, for the most part, as exciting causes upon a constitution previously predisposed to the disease, and from the symptoms of gastric derangement with which the complaint is generally ushered in, I am disposed to believe that such a predisposition is often dependant upon a disordered state of the primo vio.

Authors have usually distinguished erysipelas from phlegmon, by the swelling in the former being not so much elivated or raised above the surface of the skin, and being less plainly circumscribed. In erysipelas the skin appears as if it were burned, the bright

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redness disappears upon pressure; the throbbing and and darting pain attendant upon phlegmon is not here observable; and the inflamed part is free from tension.

The disease usually comes on with cold shiverings and other symptoms of febrile action. During the hot stage, the head, in general, becomes, considerably affected, sometimes with delirium, drowsiness and coma." The pulse is always frequent, and often full and hard." When these symptoms have continued for some time, a redness appears which gradually spreads from the part first affected to a considerable distance; if it be on the face, mostly over the whole of it, and at other times it extends entirely over the hairy scalp or descends upon the neck. The redness, after it has spread to some distance, generally disappears on the parts first affected; these become considerably swelled, and remain so after the redness disappears or abates. The whole face is considerably turgid and the eyelids often entirely closed. After some time, blisters of various sizes appear upon several portions of the face; these contain a thin yellowish liquor, which sooner or later flows out. In the blistered places, the surface of the skin sometimes becomes livid and blackish, yet it seldom

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terminates in gangrene. The cuticle, on the parts of the face unaffected with blisters, towards the termination of the complaint suffers a considerable desquamation; and, occasionally, the eyelids suppurate in a slight degree. During the progress of the inflammation on the face, the fever suffers no abatement; but is sometimes considerably increased.

The customary duration of the inflammation and fever is about eight or ten days. If the coma and delirium go on increasing from the commencement, the patient generally dies apoplectic between the seventh and the eleventh days of the disease. When the event is favourable, after the inflammation has extended itself over part or whole of the face and head, it ceases and together with it the fever; leaving the patient to return, without any evident crisis, to his former state of health.

From the above remarks, it will appear that our prognosis in this disease will be founded, principally, upon the degree of derangement which takes place in the brain; when this organ is so much affected as to produce a high degree of delirium and coma, our prospects will be very unfavorable; but when few or none of these symptoms occur, the danger is com-

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Erysipelas, was, by some of the ancients considered contageous; but this idea is now very deservedly exploded, and I believe it to be no more of a contageous nature than intermitting fever, pleurisy, or rheumatism.

One attack of the disease mostly predisposes the system to frequent subsequent returns of the same complaint.

After having, thus, given a statement of the causes and symptoms of this disease, its treatment will next engage our attention.

The principal indications of cure are to reduce the general circulation, and to relieve the distressing pain and burning sensation which is experienced on the surface of skin.

To fulfill the first indication, we must resort to the general antiphlogistic plan of treatment which is customary in other febrile affections.

The evacuations of blood letting and purging carried to as great an extent, as the urgency of the symptoms, at the time, may require, are especially indicated. The best mode of extracting blood, in this disorder, is the usual method of opening a vein in the arm, or the temporal artery; as local bleeding, by leeches or cups

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is very apt to be succeeded by those troublesome ulcers, which the disease, when it terminates in effusion sometimes produces.

Diaphoretic medicines, accompanied with plentiful dilution, will often be very adviseable, and in cases where delirium and coma rise to a considerable extent, semi-cupium, together with sinapisms applied to the feet, have also a very beneficial tendency.

The local applications which have been recommended, are very numerous, many of which have deservedly fell into disuse; therefore a complete enumeration of them would be an unnecessary waste of our time. We shall, then, only mention those which are now considered the most efficacious. And, first of blisters; these have long since been invariably resorted to in this complaint; they ought to be applied in such a manner, as to cover the whole inflamed part; and also extend a small distance over the sound skin. They have, in general, the effect of putting an immediate stop to the progress of the inflammation, and of relieving in some degree, all the other symptoms of the disease; but a very great inconvenience attending their use, is, that there are certain parts of the body, upon which they cannot

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be, conveniently applied, such as the face &c.
Might not the decoction of cantharides be very advantageously substituted.

A very common, and grateful application is oatmeal or rye flour; it must be lightly dusted upon the part, and after becoming warm, wiped off, and renewed. The object of this is to allay the itching and burning which are characteristic symptoms of this disease, and to impart an agreeable sensation of coolness.

To fulfill the same indications, the ungt: hydrarg: fort: is perhaps inferior to no other prescription. The efficacy of the mercurial ointment, as a local application in erysipelas, has been so well tested in our part of the country, that I have been induced to make it the principal subject of this dissertation, more especially as it is a remedy, which as far as my reading extends, I do not recollect to have met with in any medical author.

The credit of having discovered the beneficial tendency of the ointment in erysipelas, I believe is due to my Preceptor Doctr. A. T. Dean, I understand from the Doctr that this application was suggested to

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to him, from seeing its very excellent effects in puerperal sore leg.

The first case in which it had a trial, was that of Mr. W. R. who was seized, in the spring of 1817 with an erysipelatous eruption on the legs accompanied with a fever of a typhus description, induced, most probably, in consequence of a long continued varicose state of the veins in those parts, a great number of other remedies were previously resorted to, but without any evidently salutary effect. After the application of the mercurial ointment, the pain and inflammation abated, and all the other distressing symptoms very speedily disappeared. This young man has, since, had another attack of a similar nature, and was cured, in a very short time, by the same remedy.

The subject of the second case was Miss L. C. During the summer of 1817 she was taken with a violent erysipelatous affection of the inferior extremities, which resisted all the customary remedies for such disorders, even blisters applied so extensively as to cover entirely the inflamed portion of the skin, had but

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little impression. After all other resources failed; the mercurial ointment was used with almost immediate benefit; the pain and itching quickly subsided, and the patient was soon restored to her usual state of health. This Young Lady, perhaps, in consequence of some peculiarity of constitution, has, since, been subject to frequent visitations of the same complaint; but her face seems, now, to be the part most subject to its influence. In all these latter attacks, the ointment was used immediately upon the accession of the complaint; with the invariable result of putting an hasty termination to her sufferings.

Case third. Mr. J. — F. — was attacked in february 1810 with an extensive erysipelatous eruption on the back attended with a severe pain and itching; the ointment was applied with the happy effect of speedily arresting its progress.

Our fourth case is that of Mrs J. — who was taken, in the spring of 1810 with an extensive erysipelatous eruption, together with all its ordinary symptoms. The application of our remedy in this instance, also, was crowned with ample success.

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the subjects of them always expressed the great-
-est satisfaction, stating that no application, they
ever used before, had produced such pleasing
and greatful sensations or had given them such
immediate relief.

Besides the proofs which the above obser-
-vations afford, of the good effects of mercurial
ointment in this disorder; We have also the
testimony of other respectable Physicians of our
vicinity, to whom, partly, with a view of more
thoroughly testing its efficacy, it was previously
communicated.

From a view of what has been stated
I think myself authorised in recommending
our medicine, in terms the most exalted.

With respect to its modus operandi, we
can say nothing very certain; but it is probable
that it acts, here, in the same way as it does in
other eruptive disorders; by substituting, in
place of the diseased action, one peculiar to
itself. This will seem not at all improbable,
when we take into view, the great analogy which
subsists between this and other eruptions, in
the treatment of which, the mercurial oint-
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in every particular, resembles it very much in several of its most prominent features; as pain and itching of the skin, a slight febrile action, and the eruption at first being much of the same appearance, although rather more distinctly circumscribed.

That this is its mode of acting is also rendered more certain, from its modus operandi in general diseases. It is a law of the animal oconomy, that no two actions of an opposite kind, can exist in the system at the same time; the one will always give way to the influence of the other: Mercury, for example, being taken into the system, while labouring under disease, excites a disorder of a specific nature, to the predominating power of which, the affection, which it was intended to relieve, in most cases very speedily yields. It is, then, not unfair to conclude that its healthy influence on the surface of the skin, in erysipelas &c depends precisely on the same principle.

Notwithstanding, the very high encomiums which we have bestowed upon the mercurial ointment; we are aware of another remedy that will answer the same indications;

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for which I believe we are indebted to the speculative genius of Doctr. N. Chapman, I allude to his prescription of the watery solution of opium, as contained in his invaluable work on therapeutics and Materia Medica.

I am very sorry that no opportunity was afforded me, previously to the writing of this essay to ascertain the comparative value of the mercurial ointment and this prescription. But from the recommendation of such high and respectable authority as the above mentioned gentleman, I make no doubt that the watery solution of opium is a most valuable acquisition in this distressing disease.

It may, perhaps, seem to some, at first view, almost useless, to introduce new remedies, in the treatment of disorders, for which our resources are, already, competent; but if such would only reflect a moment; ~~that it of such~~ it would be recollected that, perhaps, on account of some peculiarity of constitution, or other unknown cause, our most certain remedies, in some cases, entirely fail. It, therefore, becomes essentially necessary that our resources to fulfill the same indications should not be too limited.

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The efficacy of mercurial ointment in erysipelas, is intended, shortly, to be made the subject of a communication to some of the periodical works of Philadelphia; so that its virtues may be more thoroughly ascertained, and a greater portion of mankind receive the advantages of a medicine, which in all probability, will equal; if not surpass all others in the treatment of this disease.

Before leaving this University, I consider myself under the most pressing obligations, thus publicly, to express my warmest gratitude, to the great and eminent characters, who have, since my entrance into their school, been so assiduously endeavouring, to establish in our youthful minds, the rudiments of a profession, upon which, if we take care to build well the superstructure, it cannot fail of doing honor to every individual among us.

R. A